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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DJIBOUTI 000127

SIPDIS  
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E AND NEA/ARP

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [KPKO](#) [KPIR](#) [DJ](#) [YM](#) [ER](#) [SO](#)

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: ASD VERSHBOW AND GODJ DISCUSS STRONG BILATERAL PARTNERSHIP, REGIONAL CHALLENGES

CLASSIFIED BY: J. Swan, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. During separate January 24 meetings, visiting Assistant Secretary of Defense (ASD) for International Security Affairs Alexander Vershbow discussed Yemen, Somalia, and Eritrea with Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh, Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, Minister of Defense Ahmed Kifleh Ougoureh, and Deputy Chief of Defense staff Major General Zakaria Cheick Ibrahim. President Guelleh thanked ASD Vershbow for current cooperation between Djibouti and the United States, and asked for increased intelligence-sharing and support to the Coast Guard to counter extremist threats. On Eritrea, Guelleh requested that the United States work with France to start inspecting Eritrea-bound vessels for arms, in order to enforce the embargo provisions of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1907. Guelleh and Youssouf both underscored Djibouti's ongoing commitment to contribute troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), and said that Djibouti remained concerned that the threat of violent extremism continued to move north from Somalia toward Djibouti. On Yemen, Foreign Minister Youssouf agreed with ASD Vershbow that the international community needed to help the government of Yemen (ROYG) as it tackled not just extremist threats from al-Qaeda, but first and foremost serious internal problems.  
END SUMMARY.

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USG-GODJ: STRONG PARTNERSHIP  
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¶2. (C) ASD Vershbow thanked President Guelleh and Foreign Minister Youssouf for the GODJ's strong partnership with the United States--including Djibouti's hosting of U.S. military forces at Camp Lemonnier, and collaboration to combat terrorism. In hosting U.S. forces, President Guelleh told ASD Vershbow and Ambassador, "we are sure that we're doing what is right." He thanked ASD Vershbow for ongoing U.S. military cooperation and intelligence-sharing, and urged continued and increased collaboration. The United States, Guelleh said, should "help Africans enforce and maintain peace, meet the economic needs of their populations, and assist with capacity-building and intelligence."

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SOMALIA

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¶3. (C) Planned U.S. Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) support for Djibouti was crucial, Guelleh told Ambassador and ASD Vershbow, even if there was no "peace yet to keep in Somalia." Guelleh volunteered that the GODJ would seek training for two or three battalions (NOTE. Each of about 450 troops. END NOTE). Guelleh assessed that a force of 2,000-3,000 Transitional Federal Government (TFG) troops could clear al-Shabaab from downtown Mogadishu, if AMISOM forces blocked the extremists from reinforcing. Foreign Minister Youssouf--while emphasizing that Djibouti would need to train the troops it planned to send to AMISOM, and continue evaluating its own security situation--contrasted Djibouti's firm commitment with what he characterized as Kenya "going back" on its promise to provide troops.

¶4. (C) Reiterating an ongoing GODJ position, Youssouf said that there was an urgent need to revise and expand AMISOM's current mandate, empowering it not just to protect the TFG, but to actually participate in peacekeeping in Mogadishu. He warned that expanding AMISOM's mandate without providing additional resources would merely result in more collateral damage, which al-Shabaab would then skillfully exploit as a public relations tool. Nevertheless,

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Youssouf said, the international community could now "rely on" 3,000 to 4,000 Somali troops with basic skills, including those recently trained in Djibouti. The Djibouti trainees, Youssouf said, were currently assigned to protect Mogadishu's port and airport, and remained disciplined despite receiving salaries sporadically.

¶5. (C) Asked to assess TFG President Sharif's leadership, Youssouf said that while Sharif was "growing" as a leader and had spearheaded some successful operations, he still looked "small" in his attempt to fill the "big" role of statesman in a transitioning country. The international community still needs to give him some time, Youssouf urged, and noted that the TFG was currently planning a "large-scale attack" to take ground from al-Shabaab in Mogadishu. The TFG still needed major assistance with organization, training, and logistics, and many members of parliament remained outside of Somalia. Several members of parliament were currently in Djibouti, Youssouf mentioned, working on the transitional constitution. The GODJ was advising the TFG to ramp up strategic communications that could counter al-Shabaab's recruitment efforts, and had even broadcast some messages supportive of this goal through the sole state-run television station in Djibouti. On a positive note, the TFG stood to benefit from fundamental splits among extremist groups with conflicting political and ideological agendas. Ordinary Somalis are increasingly rejecting extremist claims--such as that everything, even including rape, is justifiable in the context of jihad--and understand that extremists are simply using Islam as a means to an end, to achieve clan or power goals through purported religious means.

¶6. (C) Youssouf said that the GODJ had "confirmed" links between piracy and al-Shabaab terrorist activity; payment of pirate ransoms has reportedly correlated closely with upticks in attacks around Mogadishu. Youssouf emphasized that the diversion of piracy ransoms could be a very dangerous development. President Guelleh emphasized that the international community needed to help Somalia's coast guard become capable of combating piracy and illegal fishing. No piracy problem in the world, he noted, has ever been solved without tackling pirates' land bases. Djibouti's port-based economy, President Guelleh reiterated, suffers economically when piracy drives up shipping insurance rates.

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EXTREMIST THREATS  
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¶ 7. (C) Protecting Djibouti from terrorist threats remains a central GODJ preoccupation. Combating terrorism is a "global responsibility," President Guelleh told ASD Vershbow, and not an American problem. Sharing intelligence is a key shield against terrorist threats, as is denying extremists safe havens by helping governments such as Somalia and Yemen tackle local problems. The threat of terrorist activity continues to move north from Somalia, Youssouf said, and Djibouti was concerned that its political involvement in Somalia and its hosting of foreign troops made the country an attractive target for extremists. Kenya, he noted, had recently become a "less welcoming place" for ethnic Somalis, with the result that more and more Somalis--not all of whom may have the best intentions--are moving their home base to Djibouti.

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YEMEN  
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¶ 8. (C) ASD Vershbow outlined U.S. cooperation with the ROYG, including our emphasis on building partnerships with regional states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. ASD Vershbow highlighted the upcoming January 28 "Friends of Yemen" meeting in London, and stressed that while the United States and the international community are prepared to assist Yemen, the ROYG must also be prepared to make tough decisions. Djibouti, ASD Vershbow told Guelleh, has already sent its neighbors a powerful message about taking responsibility in the region. Guelleh said that Yemen's economic crisis was proving a fertile breeding ground for terrorists, and urged greater sharing of intelligence on threats, particularly among Gulf states. Although al-Shabaab has declared it is taking the fight to Yemen, Youssouf said, serious internal political problems in the north and south remain the ROYG's biggest challenges, with threats from al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab taking second place.

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ERITREA  
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¶ 9. (C) Both President Guelleh and Foreign Minister Youssouf asked the United States--possibly in tandem with France--to begin inspecting Eritrea-bound vessels for violations of the UNSCR 1907 arms embargo. Guelleh said that he had raised this issue with President Sarkozy during the latter's brief stopover in Djibouti January 19. ASD Vershbow promised to engage France on this request, and said that the international community needed to prevent Eritrea from continuing to play a regional spoiler role based on its "zero sum" relationship with Ethiopia. Eritrea, Youssouf underlined, continued to try to export "anarchy" to Djibouti, and remained dangerous in Sudan, Somalia, and Yemen. Yemeni President Saleh suspected that Eritrea was arming Houthi rebels, and had recently told Djibouti that a vessel full of arms had been intercepted en route from Eritrea to Yemen. It was possible, Youssouf said, that Eritrea was fulfilling the agendas of

other countries—for example, Libya or even Iran. Domestically, Eritrea is an "open air prison," Youssouf told ASD Vershbow, citing the recent mass defection of the entire Eritrean national soccer team.

¶10. (C) Minister of Defense Kifleh Ougoureh asserted that the GSE is training Ethiopian Oromo opposition groups, Somali Ogadenis and Islamists, and now Djiboutian Afars to destabilize Djibouti and cast the border dispute as the result of internal Djiboutian unrest. The Minister thanked ASD Vershbow for strong USG support for UNSCR 1907, but warned that Eritrean President Isaias is preparing new "maneuvers" to threaten Djibouti.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) Djiboutians have always been acutely aware that the turbulence of their neighborhood can easily disturb their relative tranquility. While well accustomed to instability in the region, President Guelleh and his administration have recently felt particularly hemmed in between tenuously-controlled Somalia, major internal problems in Yemen, regional terrorist threats, and a festering border conflict with Eritrea. Djibouti deeply appreciates USG support to mitigate these threats—from political backing on UNSCR 1907 to information-sharing. As evidenced by President Guelleh's request for greater intelligence-sharing, support to the Coast Guard, and help enforcing the arms embargo against Eritrea, Djibouti will likely continue to look to the United States as a key regional security partner. END COMMENT.

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¶12. (U) ASD Vershbow cleared this cable.  
SWAN